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Everyday Aesthetics and the Practice of Historical Reenactment

Revisiting Cavell's Emerson

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ABSTRACT: Throughout his career, Stanley Cavell's subject has been the ordinary: what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call 'the near, the low, the common'. Cavell provides compelling insights into Emerson's efforts to locate philosophy within the flow of everyday life. He examines how Emerson renews common thinking, citations, and fragments from the works of others by means of his 'aversive thinking': his technique of turning writing back upon itself. While taking Cavell's Emerson readings as its point of departure, this essay switches Cavell's philosophical angle for a philological one. I suggest that Emerson's engagement with contemporary debates concerning the historical reading of sacred and secular literature (the Bible, Homer, Shakespeare) formed his own practice of reworking literatures of various origins and recasting aesthetics in major ways.

KEYWORDS: Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Cavell, Stanley; philology; historicism; Grimm, Herman

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Today, we know Ralph Waldo Emerson as a thinker of transition, as someone who regards human life as a ceaselessly revising process. His renowned epigrammatical exclamations suggest that the individual 'in the right state' needs to be 'Man Thinking' and to respond to life's insecurities and 'slippery sliding surfaces' with an always active, alert, and self-corrective mind.[1] Drawing on an eclectic body of works of others, he appropriates, reworks, and reenacts his sources, thereby performing his core concern of keeping the mind in a restless state, in a 'moment of change, say of becoming' rather than 'being'.[2] His writing practice, aimed at gearing the trajectories of the mind toward a fluid stream of transformation, leads to a fascinating de-hierarchization and pluralization of objects of aesthetic experience. Breaking with artistic norms and introducing a new voice into aesthetic discourses of his

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Alfred R. Ferguson and others, 7 vols to date (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971–), I: *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (1971), p. 53, III: *Essays, Second Series* (1984), p. 28.

2 Stanley Cavell, 'Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 105–30 (p. 111).

time, he turns to the low and common, calling on his readers to see and appreciate the value and beauty of the everyday.

According to Stanley Cavell, it is Emerson's preoccupation with the significance and value of the ordinary that is vital to understanding and appreciating the originality of his philosophical work. Drawing attention to and elevating ordinary matters — 'The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body' —[3] Emerson advances his philosophical approach in conversation with, and in contradistinction to, the German philosophy of idealism and England's empirical tradition.[4] In *Transcendental Etudes,* Cavell locates a place for Emerson's penchant for the low and common on the philosophical map of his time while also bringing into view how his thinking and aesthetics anticipates that of J. L. Austin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Nietzsche.[5]

The eclectic composition of Emerson's works and their cross-cultural impact call for such transnational examinations focused on his place in the history of philosophy. However, while the 'philosophicality' (to use Cavell's term) of his ordinary aesthetics and technique of writing have been explored widely, their historicity is understudied. To be sure, it is well known that the reception of German classical scholarship and historical Bible criticism played a major role in the development of Transcendentalism, America's first major cultural movement, and that historical research had a formative impact on Emerson's work. In this context, the names of young students from New England who learned German and went to study at the University of Göttingen keep cropping up, as well as references to the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, Ludwig Heeren, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Wilhelm de Wette, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich August Boeckh, Cornelius Conway Felton, George Ripley, James Marsh, George Bancroft, and Robert Bridges Patton.[6] Needless to say, I am

3 Emerson, *Collected Works*, I, p. 67.

4 Stanley Cavell, 'An Emerson Mood', in Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 20–32 (p. 25).

5 Cavell, 'The Philosopher in American Life (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)', in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, pp. 33–58 (pp. 34–36).

6 For the most recent comprehensive overview, see Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *Transatlantic Crossings and Transformations: German-American Cultural Transfer from the 18th to the End of the 19th Century*, Interamericana, 6 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2015).

deeply indebted to the meticulous recoveries of these multiple strands of cross-cultural transmission and transformation by other scholars; however, my own assessment of the significance of these transatlantic travels of intellectual history differs from existing analyses.

Most critical writings concerned with the role of German historical criticism in early to mid-nineteenth-century New England focus their enquiries on identifying what sources, translations, and modes of transmission contributed to the hallmark of the Transcendentalist movement, which is often referred to as a subjective turn.[7] A question that rarely gets sufficiently addressed in this context, however, is exactly how this trafficking of critical techniques and ideas translated into activities supporting this turn toward the project of empowering the subject. How did people's engagement with past civilizations contribute to strategies of authorizing the individual? And what qualities distinguish such authorized individuals? These questions call for a broad reassessment of this vital period of intellectual history and a review of Transcendentalist writings and translations other than those of Emerson. Given the scope of this paper, however, I focus only on him. More specifically, I ask how the historico-critical discourse of Emerson's time contributed to what Cavell calls his practice of 'aversive thinking.' From a philosophical vantage point, Cavell examines how Emerson renews common thinking, citations, and fragments by means of aversive thinking: his way of turning writing back upon itself and away from conformity and conventional frames of reference.[8] A ques-

7 Most works that focus on the reception of German Biblical criticism in New England demonstrate how the translations and reviews of German theological texts by Transcendentalist critics such as James Marsh or George Ripley transfer the idea of divine authority from the letter into the interior world of the subject. Under the influence of German historical criticism, American critics begin to treat religious texts no longer as infallible testimonies of divine revelation, but as historical records giving diverse accounts of human experiences of the spiritual world. Against the backdrop of their reception of German critical efforts, Transcendentalists install the subject's soul as the resource we ought to tap in order to develop an intuitive understanding of religious truth. See Philip F. Gura's chapter 'Reinvigorating a Faith' in his *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pp. 46–68.

8 See Cavell, 'Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche', in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, pp. 141–70 (p. 145): '[A] guiding thought in directing myself to Emerson's way of thinking is his outcry in the sixth paragraph of "Self-Reliance": "The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-Reliance is its aversion." I gather him there to be characterizing his writing, hence to mean that he writes in aversion to society's demand for conformity, specifically that his writing expresses

tion that arises here is how Emerson's concern with detaching meaning from commonplace contexts and treating life as a restless stream of contingent events relates to, and is formed by, the scholarly discourse that was unfolding in the related fields of religious criticism and classical studies. His engagement with and contribution to these debates is illuminating, I suggest, because they cast light on why he came to treat sources of various origins as sites for the continuous breaking and remaking of customs and aesthetic norms. In fact, a friend of his highlights the importance of the latest developments in humanist research for Emerson's thinking and writing.

When his correspondent Herman Grimm first comes across his writings in the mid-nineteenth century, he compares reading Emerson's essays to the discovery of a new continent.[9] Without understanding much initially, the originality and liveliness of Emerson's style captivates the son of Wilhelm Grimm (the younger of the two Grimm brothers). Thoughts that have crossed his own mind multiple times appear fresh, and his thinking seems to renew itself through Emerson's formulations. In trying to explain how and why he developed such an unparalleled mode of composing, Grimm goes beyond suggesting that Emerson's style is simply a testament to his native genius. Interestingly, he links his writing technique to the direction that American nineteenth-century scholarship took. He argues that the ways in which Emerson's contemporaries practice research provides the broader intellectual historical context for his success, bringing the thoughts of past generations into conversation with his love and enthusiasm for the present without letting the cultural legacies of others inhabit and stifle him:

> [H]ow much Emerson's doctrine has become second nature to today's America shows the condition of its budding scholarly life. Among us, we take our point of departure from what *Wissenschaft* demands of itself (certainly the higher point of view), while in America it benefits the learner — in many cases

his self-consciousness, his thinking as the imperative to an incessant conversion or refiguration of society's incessant demands for his consent — his conforming himself — to its doings, and at the same time to mean that his writing must accordingly be the object of aversion to society's consciousness, to what it might read in him.'

9 Herman Grimm, *Fünfzehn Essays. Erste Folge*, 3rd rev. and enlarged edn (Berlin: Dümmler, 1884), p. 438.

> the more practical and better path toward the goal. The living should take priority.
>
> [W]ie sehr jene Lehre Emersons dem heutigen Amerika in Fleisch und Blut übergegangen sei, zeigt die Beschaffenheit des dort sich regenden wissenschaftlichen Lebens. Bei uns geht man aus von dem, was die Wissenschaft für sich verlange — gewiss der höhere Standpunkt; in Amerika von dem, was den Lernenden dienlich sei — in vielen Fällen der praktischere und besser zum Ziele führende. Zuerst sollen die Lebenden zu ihrem Rechte kommen.[10]

According to Grimm's assessment, it is the humanist orientation that distinguishes American research practices and resonates with Emerson's approach to writing. German scholarship, by contrast, appears compartmentalized, fractured, and detached from the flow of everyday life in Grimm's eyes. What he misses in Germany is the strong link between *Wissenschaft* and the project of *Bildung* that he finds in New England's educational institutions and reverberating in the writing of the Transcendentalists' best-known figurehead. Ironically, however, while Grimm recognizes the crucial role of *Wissenschaft* in Emerson's style, he overlooks that it was precisely his discovery of a humanist impulse in scholarly practices that drew him to German research in the first place.

Emerson highlights figures whose works express what he considers pioneering treatments of tradition and suggests that their creative fashioning of the works of others is bound up with contemporary historical criticism. In the second lecture on 'Literature' (1839) of 'The Present Age' series, he discusses the 'new epoch in criticism' dating from the ways 'ancient history has been dealt with by Niebuhr, Wolf, Müller, and Heeren', and in particular from 'Wolf's attack upon the authenticity of Homeric poems'.[11] He demonstrates that their research reveals in different ways the openness of ancient history; issues we thought we had settled appear inconclusive in light of their findings.

10 Herman Grimm, 'Ralph Waldo Emerson – Ein Nachruf', in *Der Briefwechsel Ralph Waldo Emerson / Herman Grimm und die Bildung von Post-mortem-Gemeinschaften*, ed. by Thomas Meyer, trans. by Helga Paul, Europäer-Schriftenreihe, 14 (Basel: Perseus, 2007), pp. 67–68 (my English translation).

11 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Literature [Second Lecture]', in Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace Williams, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959–1972), III: *1838–1842* (1972), pp. 224–37 (p. 225).

The new insights about the lack of unity and fragmentary nature of the Homeric poems lead Emerson to draw a number of interesting conclusions relevant to the functions of past legacies in his own time:

> Out of histories written in so narrow a mind as most of our histories are, laborious indeed but without a pious and loving eye to the universal contributions of nature to a people, nothing can come but incongruous, broken impressions, unsatisfactory to the mind. But the views obtained by patient wisdom studious of facts and open to the permanent as well as partial causes would give an analogues impression to the landscape. As it studies history, so it looks at the sciences in a higher connection than before […] Our own country, I may remark, shares largely in whatsoever is new and aspiring in thought. Our young men travel in foreign countries and read at home with hungry eyes foreign books. Wishful eyes are cast to Germany […] but here is Germany or nowhere.[12]

The most significant shortcoming of the method of history writing customary in Emerson's own country is that it leaves the mind with 'broken impressions'; it provides a potpourri of collected data but no coherent interpretation. What would become the hallmark of Emerson's view on how the modern individual ought to approach history is already evident in his early lecture: for history to be of any value, the interpreter needs to take on an active role as a shaper of facts. There are obvious resonances between this lecture and the essay on Shakespeare, in which Emerson calls him the 'father of German literature' because of his ability to bring the past back to life in a loving manner.[13] In the lecture on 'Literature', he also gestures at the important role that a 'loving eye' plays for viewing the significance of historical materials in broader contexts. More than that, he suggests that a subject who has learned to exercise his 'loving eye' will also begin to see the landscape differently. What Emerson gains from studies of cultural history, in other words, has a formative impact on his visual capacities to draw fragments together in a new field of vision. His way of turning the transnational rise of new approaches to assessing and relating to past civilizations into an occasion for a pervasive recasting of aesthetic

12 Ibid., p. 228.

13 Emerson, *Collected Works*, IV: *Representative Men* (1987), p. 117.

categories marks one of the most interesting aspects of his delving into cultural and literary history.

These passages from Emerson's early lecture provide merely a small glimpse into his comprehensive and nuanced engagement with the German critical tradition throughout his work. We can see, however, that his unconventional reenactment of forms of cultural expression flows naturally from the scholarly discourse into which he was tapping. The use of history and books lies in what they can do for the living generation. Regardless of whether Emerson turns to Friedrich August Wolf, Barthold Georg Niebuhr, or Johann Gottfried Herder, the question of interest to him is how they manage to put their findings into the service of the individual's development and present-day cultural renewal. He regards ancient texts as models for man's constant attempt to give expression to experience, and believes that the way to engage with them is by generating new modes of expression: 'They say much of the study of the Ancients, but what else does that signify than, direct your attention to the real world and seek to express it, since that did the ancients whilst they lived.'[14]

Emerson, I suggest, uses this perspective on history as a springboard to corroborate and authorize what he would work into a fully-fledged practice of writing and recasting of aesthetic norms. Man needs to break with traditions and conventions as much as he needs to experiment with and cultivate new forms of life and expressions, such as 'the low, the common […] the philosophy of the street', rather than what is traditionally considered 'sublime and beautiful'.[15] Emerson's concern with the historical debates of his time shows clearly that leaving old forms behind is as important to him as creating new ones. For him it is the right balance between letting go and appropriating new habits of thinking and living that indicates the health and happiness of individuals and societies alike. While Cavell has designated Emerson's place in the history of philosophy, his place in the historical discourse as it developed in the related fields of classicism and religion has yet to be determined. Such examinations of his voice in debates over techniques

14 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by William H. Gilman and others, 16 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), v (1965), p. 290.

15 Emerson, *Collected Works*, I, p. 67.

of historical enquiry and their humanist value will show that Cavell's approach to treating his work 'less as an object of interpretation than as a means of interpretation', and as a nodal point for placing his 'writing in conjunction with the writing of other writers', is not only a viable option but truly in the spirit of Emerson's own practice of historical reenactment.[16]

16 Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 'Introduction', pp. 1–9 (p. 5).

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